



THE ARCTIC PRAIRIES

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ILLUSTRATIONS FROM DRAWINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

IV.—THE LAND OF THE MUSK-OX

XXI.—THE ARCTIC PRAIRIES



On August 20 we reached Sandhill Bay, the farthest arm of Lake Aylmer, our northmost point by canoe. Next morning, after breakfast, we set off on foot, still

ward, to seek for musk-ox, keeping to the westward of Great Fish River. The

land is rolling, with occasional rocky hills and long, level meadows in the low-lying valleys. Practically all of it would be considered as one country, and nearly every meadow is covered by three or four grazing caribou.

When, about six or seven miles from Sandhill Bay, we halted for rest and camped on the top of the long ridge of glacial drift that lies to the east of Great Fish River. And now we had a most complete and spectacular view of the immense open country that we had come so far to see. It was spread before us like a huge, minute and wonderful chart, and plainly marked with the processes of its shaping-time.

Imagine a region of low Archæan hills, extending one thousand miles each way, subjected for thousands of years to a continual succession of glaciers, crushing, grinding, planing, smoothing, ripping up, and smoothening again, carrying off whole ranges of broken-up hills, in fragments, to dump them at some other point, grind them again while there, then push and hustle them out of that region into some other a few hundred miles farther, there again to tumble and grind them together, pack them into the hollows, and dump them into pyramidal piles on plains and uplands. Imagine this going on for thousands of years, and we shall have the hills lowered and polished, the valleys more or less filled with broken rocks.

Now the glacial action is succeeded by a time of flood. For another age all is below water, dammed by the northern ice, and ice-

bergs breaking from the parent sheet carry bedded in them countless boulders with which they go travelling south on the open water. As they melt, the boulders are dropped; hill and hollow share equally in this age-long shower of erratics. Nor does it cease till the progress of the warmer day removes the northern ice-dam, sets free the flood, and the region of Archæan rocks stands bare and dry.

It must have been a dreary spectacle at that time, low bare hills of gneiss, granite, etc., low valleys half filled with broken rock, and over everything a sprinkling of erratic boulders; no living thing in sight, nothing green, nothing growing, nothing but evidence of mighty power used only to destroy. A waste of shattered granite spotted with hundreds of lakes, thousands of lakelets, millions of ponds that are marvellously blue, clear and lifeless.

But a new force is born on the scene, it attacks not this hill or rock, or that loose stone, but on every point of every stone and rock, in the vast domain, it appears—the lowest form of lichen, a mere stain of grey. This spreads and, by its own corrosive power, eats foothold on the granite; it fructifies in little black velvet spots; then one of lilac flecks the pink tones of the granite to help the effect; soon another kind follows—a pale olive green lichen that fruits in bumps of rich brown velvet; then another, branching like a tiny tree; there is a ghostly kind like white chalk rubbed lightly over, and yet another of small green blots, and one is like a sprinkling of scarlet snow—each in turn of a higher and larger type, which, in due time, prepared the way for mosses higher still.

In the less exposed places these come forth; seeking the shade, searching for moisture, they form like small sponges on a coral reef; but, growing, spread and change to meet the changing contours of the land they win, and with every victory or upward move adopt some new refined intensive tint that is

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